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ABSTRACT

"Projet Mercure," or the Mercury Project, was a consortium of universities in North America that used videoconferencing to link with university classrooms in France; its purpose was to provide a new approach to teaching French language and civilization. This paper examines one such videoconference between both Austin Peay State University (Tennessee) and the University of Tennessee at Martin and the Universite d'Orleans (France) that covered the American presidential election process. Areas of discussion include a history of Projet Mercure, student and teacher preparations for the conference, technical considerations, a description of what happened during the conference, and an overview of the lessons learned. (Author/MES)

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COMBINING STUDIO VIDEOCONFERENCING AND THE INTERNET TO PROMOTE INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

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Abstract: *Projet Mercure*, or the Mercury Project, was a consortium of universities in North America that used videoconferencing to link with university classrooms in France; its purpose was to provide a new approach to teaching French language and civilization. This paper examines one such videoconference between both Austin Peay State University and the University of Tennessee at Martin and the Université d'Orléans that covered the American presidential election process. Areas of discussion include a history of *Projet Mercure*, student and teacher preparations for the conference, technical considerations, a description of what happened during the conference, and an overview of the lessons learned.

"Bonjour, Jeanne."
"Qui est à l'appareil?"

In 1963, this dialog in conversational French, delivered on reel-to-reel tapes, initiated our first experiences in foreign language learning. Prior to this, radio and recordings had been used on a limited basis to deliver the audio experience of a foreign language to beginning students. After 38 years, we are still looking for dialog with our French neighbors, only now *l'appareil* has changed. In fact, it has changed continually during these intervening years. Advances in technology in the last decade have brought significant new communication options to the foreign language classroom. Today our foreign language students send each other email, fax documents, visit each other's web sites to examine position statements, and finally meet each other face-to-face in compressed video classrooms. Long after classroom encounters, students may continue the exchange of ideas via online options and explore personal viewpoints and relationships that put a human face on the culture they study.

Projet Mercure, or the Mercury Project, was a consortium of universities in North America using videoconferencing to create a link with university classrooms in France. The project headquarters were at Oakland University in Michigan, and member

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universities included The University of Tennessee at Martin, Austin Peay State University, the University of Windsor, Dowling College, Purdue University, and Northwestern University. In France, the project center was at the Université d'Orléans, with additional universities (Nanterre, Paris III and Bourgogne) participating through the FIED, the Fédération Interuniversitaire de l'Enseignement à Distance.

History of *Projet Mercure*

Projet Mercure initially grew out of a distance learning project begun in 1992 at the Université d'Orléans to provide a new approach to teaching French language and civilization. Orléans designed a course delivered via a combination of on-site immersion and videoconference to adult learners of French at a university in Sweden. As a result of this project, Orléans became the first French university to create its own videoconferencing studio.

Michel Dion, Head of External Relations and Communication for the Université d'Orléans, sought additional ways to apply this new technology. He invited Oakland University in Michigan to participate in a project involving American students enrolled in a business French course and French students of business at Orléans. In the initial videoconference session, students at Oakland interviewed a group of economic development officials at Orléans in French. In the following session, the French students of business interviewed (in English) a group of vice presidents of American corporations.

The following year, a videoconference project on substance abuse was organized between students studying French civilization at Oakland University and the University of Michigan-Dearborn and students enrolled in a class on American Civilization at Orléans. In the first session, the American students made a presentation on the controversial subject, followed by a question-and-answer session, all in English. In the second session, the roles were reversed, with presentations by the students in Orléans in French, followed by questions posed of them by the American students. This model was found to be effective and has continued to serve for subsequent exchanges.

The next year, one of the participants, Paul Crapo, left Dearborn, Michigan to become chair of Modern Foreign Languages at the University of Tennessee at Martin. He anticipated continuing his involvement with the Mercury Project, but upon his arrival in Tennessee, he was dismayed to discover that the project could not be conducted at UT-Martin. While UT-Martin had a modern videoconferencing studio, it was unable to make the dial-up connections required for conferencing with France. Instead, it was limited to network connections to other sites within the University of Tennessee system. Crapo became acquainted with Karen Sorenson, then assistant professor of French at Austin Peay State University, and learned that Austin Peay, located in Clarksville, Tennessee about 100 miles northeast of UT-Martin, had recently installed a videoconferencing classroom that had the dial-up capability required to connect with France. As a result, students and faculty from both universities joined forces with the Université d'Orléans and planned a videoconference series on the subject of presidential elections.

Preparations for the conference

American students needed both content and technical orientation for the videoconference. With regard to content, faculty and students gathered print media and video materials relating to both French and American politics and the presidential election process in each country, creating a database of information. Both French and American participants faxed articles and sent videos overseas to be used by their partner classrooms. To provide all participating students access to a broad range of information on both the French and American elections, Robert Peckham, professor of French at UT-Martin, created a website for *Projet Mercure* (http://fmc.utm.edu/~rpeckham/presi.html). The site contained links to a number of items ranging from the personal political statements of the French and American participants to web sites relating to the political parties, candidates, their platforms, and their reception in the press. Students interested in the French elections could access the official web sites of the French government on the President and presidential elections. Students interested in learning more about the presidential elections in the U.S. could explore the official Republican National Convention site, the Republican Presidential Candidates site, the Democratic Party CG '96 site, Democratic National Committee site, and The White House site. In addition, links connected students to the Reform Party Perot '96 and the Libertarian Party sites.

To prepare their statements, the Austin Peay and UT-Martin students were told to read about and reflect upon the election-year issues that were most important to them as individuals. Students were then asked to focus on one or two of those issues and to construct a one to one-and-a-half page statement that developed their views. The American students were a diverse group: some did not perceive themselves as interested in politics and political issues; some had never voted while others had some experience in politics at the local or state level. One student from UT-Martin had even been a delegate to the Democratic National Convention.

Technical considerations and preparations

Compressed video, the planned medium of the videoconference with France, uses computers and software to digitize and send video and audio signals from one site over telephone lines to computers at other sites. The receiving computers use the same means to collect and display digital video and audio information locally. In this manner, live communications that contain video, audio, and graphic information are exchanged. Most compressed videoconferencing done in the United States is handled via some kind of terrestrial phone lines, either large capacity lines or a number of small capacity lines that are digitally bonded together to carry all the audio and video signals.

The conference room at the Austin Peay site is a traditional classroom made up of four rows of tables that could seat as many as 24 persons. Eight classroom microphones are evenly distributed, two to each row. At the front of the room are two 35" monitors--one displayed the incoming signal from France; the other showed what was being sent to France.

There were two cameras aimed at conference participants. One camera was at the front of the room between the two monitors and showed those seated at the tables. A second

camera was aimed at a teaching station located to one side of the monitors. These were the only two cameras used in the original videoconference. A third overhead camera for displaying documents and a videocassette recorder completed the video options available.

Connectivity testing, to see whether the Austin Peay site could establish a connection with the Université d'Orléans for a compressed videoconference began in the summer of 1996. As the proposed conference to Orléans was overseas, BellSouth technicians had to calibrate the transmission rate of the signals to those in France that ran at a lower speed. They also had to send the signals via satellite as well as over phone lines.

In scheduling the conference, there was a time element to consider. The six-hour time difference made it necessary for the conference to begin no later than 8:30 AM Central Time in the United States so that students and technicians in France were still available at school.

As this exchange was a first for the Austin Peay students, two orientation sessions were undertaken: a planning meeting and overview for Austin Peay faculty and a general orientation and coaching session for the students. At the first meeting we discussed the room set-up and equipment layout, how cameras should be aimed, and where students should sit to maximize the video image. We chose to seat students in a block formation rather than a panel-type arrangement in order to include the greatest number of students in the video picture.

The session with students included both technical and presentation information, such as how to dress to complement the video image. Students were asked not to wear white, because cameras tend to darken to minimize the glare of white fabric. As a result, facial features can be lost, particularly on those with darker complexions. Students were also shown how to turn on and speak directly into the microphones so that they could be heard. Participants were advised that if they spoke too quickly or too softly, those at the other sites would miss words or parts of words, making speech unintelligible. Similarly, students were told that quick, animated movement of their hands and bodies would cause the image to break up, looking jerky to those at the receiving sites. Participants were asked to minimize such movements. Students listened carefully to their coaching and practiced with the equipment.

In addition to technical issues regarding visuals and sound, communication issues were addressed in the student orientation meeting. Participants were urged to look into the camera when speaking rather than at the monitor displaying the image of those at the remote site. Initially, students felt awkward interacting this way; however, they soon realized that by gazing into the camera, they appeared to be looking directly into the eyes of the distant participants, increasing the visual communication with those on the other end. Also, students were asked to consider rewriting their position papers as speeches, simplifying the information, repeating the basic ideas several times, speaking clearly and conversationally rather than reading, and allowing facial expressions to animate their presentation. Finally, students were forewarned that there would be a delay of several seconds in the audio response from the other site as a result of the compression process.

Unfolding of the videoconference

The videoconference on U.S. Presidential elections was held in November of 1996, almost immediately following Election Day, with students from both UT-Martin and Austin Peay attending. A simple presentation format was planned: American students would present in English their personal political statements which French students had had the opportunity to read and study in advance. After the statements were given, the French students would pose questions either to specific individuals or to the American students in general. Finally, there would be an opportunity for open discussion among the French and American students, time permitting.

As the conference unfolded, the American and French students briefly introduced themselves. Most American students opted not to risk speaking extemporaneously on their topics and began reading their position papers. Even though students had been instructed to read slowly into the microphone, their excitement caused several of them to speak so quickly that the French students interrupted and asked them to slow down. It was not until halfway into the conference that the technology and process became transparent enough for students to begin to talk about very personal views on difficult issues, such as racism and right wing politics in French presidential elections. As an outgrowth of this discussion, race and racism became a topic for the following year's series of exchanges.

A difficulty occurred when a third classroom of American students observing the videoconference did not mute the microphones at their site. Certain remarks made by the presenting students set off laughter among those observing. This interruption caused the cameras, and thus the focus of the conference, to be diverted to the wrong site. The continuing noise kept control of the cameras for some five minutes until students at the third site quieted enough to allow the conference to resume.

Lessons learned

In the process of carrying out this first in a series of videoconferences, we learned a number of lessons that might be helpful to those undertaking or considering similar compressed video projects on their campuses.

It is important to establish the focus of the videoconference early to allow students ample time to research the conference topic. In addition, it is essential to set realistic communication goals. Students may not speak their best when nervous--but their appreciation for the exchange will be enhanced if the experience is pleasant and positive.

Organization is essential. Plan at least an hour for each videoconference session to allow students ample time to express their views and to allow open discussion to develop. If possible, coordinate the subject of the videoconference with course content and choose your partner school carefully. Ideally, students should be of similar proficiency levels, and schools should have conferencing equipment with the capacity to connect at similar speeds. Give students ample time to rehearse speeches or questions, and schedule a dress rehearsal with students, complete with technology usage.

It is important for teachers to familiarize themselves with any technology used. If an instructor is nervous or rattled, the students will be equally so. Instructors at ease with the equipment can guide students comfortably through the experience. Learn to anticipate any time lag or jerkiness that may occur as a result of video compression. If possible, use the technology throughout the planning process to smooth the transition into the videoconference.

To calm initial nerves, try using icebreakers. This tactic will help relax the atmosphere and encourage spontaneous exchange at the videoconference. Prepare students to speak rather than to read their texts. Encouraging students to state, elaborate, and restate their points will enhance comprehension for the listeners at distant sites.

Although oral proficiency levels of the two partner classrooms should ideally be matched, it is inevitable that some differences will occur. While it is helpful to have a student to facilitate communication at each site, French students have emphasized that they prefer having a typical American student to one who is a native French speaker. They like to hear American students stating their opinions without mediation by foreign students, even if occasionally student grammar is less than perfect in French.

We were initially disappointed that French students didn't contact the American students by e-mail after the conferences, but then we learned that very few French students had access to e-mail in 1996-1997. Since that time, private and university e-mail accounts have become more common for French students, and e-mail dialogs between individual Mercury Project participants became quite commonplace.

Expect the unexpected; it is a mixed blessing--both unforeseen difficulties and unforeseen breakthroughs in communication can occur. For example, if there are outside observers, have the microphones at their site muted to avoid unanticipated interruptions.

Conclusion

Students benefited from the project in several ways. The videoconference provided American students with up-to-date information on French presidential politics--an important aspect of contemporary French culture. It also gave students of both cultures access to the way their foreign peers perceive political issues; such interpersonal exposure is not so readily available by other means. Additionally, the compressed video meeting offered students live, extemporaneous speaking and listening opportunities with French nationals of their own age. Such contact with native speakers may otherwise be somewhat limited for a university with a small foreign language program. As compared with e-mail and website exchanges, the videoconference occurred in real time and views were expressed extemporaneously. Were it not for the face-to-face opportunity provided by the videoconference, this kind of authentic exchange would not have been possible.

Response to this project was generally excellent. Despite some frustrations with background noise and difficulties in learning to use the equipment effectively, students generally expressed high satisfaction with the project. Several students declared the

videoconference to be one of the most positive foreign language events they had experienced.

In addition, a videoconferencing project creates a relationship among institutions that naturally encourages and enhances study-abroad partnerships. By connecting real faces and voices to the second language experience, students have an additional motivation to study abroad and, perhaps, less fear of initial encounters with their peers overseas.

Supported by web and e-mail technology, an undertaking, such as the *Projet Mercure*, has the opportunity to extend and endure far beyond the typical classroom experience. As Maya Angelou said to a 1997 national meeting of foreign language teachers, we learn languages so that one human being can say to another, "This is how I feel. This is how I think. This is what I believe." Through the immediacy and interactivity of videoconferencing, these are concepts that students at French and American universities have a compelling means to express.

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